Most of what I have to say, what I was planning to say tonight addresses just this kind of unraveling of our political culture. And as I'll make clear, it's happening on both sides of our politics. But we should understand that no morally sane person on the left or the right supports this kind of violence, or feels anything but horror over it. And so when Elon Musk jumps online within minutes of the shooting and tells his 225 million followers on X that the left is the party of murder, and then someone with two million followers responds saying it's not only the left, it's Bill Gates, Reid Hoffman, and George Soros. That's not a description of reality, but it is helping to create a reality that is actually quite dangerous.

The same can be said of President Trump's response, which came later in the evening, unfortunately framing the recent history of political violence in this country as a problem that comes only from the left, ignoring all the obvious cases from the right, even cases done in his name, even cases that he has joked about, like the hammer attack on Paul Pelosi. So rather than calling for calm and unity, he used this moment to accuse his political opponents, even his mainstream political opponents of supporting murder. And even more dangerously, he implied that he was going to then use the full power of the federal government to turn against them. And this this is not the behavior of a leader who is committed to democratic norms. It's the behavior of someone who is intentionally deepening the spiral of political radicalization in this country. The man is an arsonist pretending to be a firefighter.

Now, we don't know who the shooter is yet, as far as I know. And given Kirk's influence on the right, it seems quite possible that the killer hated him for his politics. And so therefore, he might be a creature of the left in some way. But that doesn't mean that he represents anyone or any cause apart from his own broken brain. Some people are simply crazy and they snap. Some people are psychopaths, and some people are deeply ideological, and some people are a combination of those things. So we're not going to know what motivated Kirk's killer until he's caught.

But whatever his motives, we shouldn't exaggerate what a murder like this means for our politics. There simply is no large constituency in this country for political assassination. There's no party of murder. However, insisting that there is one could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because our political culture is increasingly combustible. And social media is amplifying extreme views that are not representative of most Americans, but it seems that way. Many of us are spending hours a day staring into this incredibly ugly funhouse mirror and losing a sense of what other people are really like. So this this cultural death spiral is something that is pretty central to my talk tonight.

I never met Charlie Kirk. He was a clearly a political prodigy on the right and uh, clearly adored by many, many people, especially the younger generation. We obviously were not political allies, but I feel nothing but sadness for him and his family.

For the last 20 years or so, I've been speaking and writing about a wide range of topics, the connections between which may have seemed somewhat elusive. Things like the nature of consciousness and meditation as a way to recognize it. The problems with organized religion and with Islam in particular, the risks we're all running when we fail to build a culture of reason and honesty and integrity. A failure that has rarely been so evident in America as it is at present. The role that technology is playing in our collective derangement, social media especially, and artificial intelligence increasingly. Unfortunately, these themes seem more relevant than ever. Our culture appears to be committing a colossal act of self-harm, if not actual suicide.

And then of course, there are deeper questions that are always relevant, like how should we live and what is a good life? And tonight I'll try to bring some of these strands together without sounding like the Unabomber or Deepak Chopra. First, I will describe our predicament and then I will point to solutions. But fair warning, I'm going to bring you into some very dark places. But

then I will bring you out again. Almost.
It has probably always been true to say that the world is in a state of chaos and that our lives together are not nearly as good as they could be or should be. That specific risks of injury or illness or death are intolerable. And that many of the people who are in charge are imbeciles or worse. This was true 500 years ago and 50 and it's true today. But I think we can be forgiven for thinking that today really is different. In every generation, people have struggled to define the character and purpose of the time in which they lived, but I think it really is getting harder to do this. It seems the central challenge of our time is to figure out how to live in a world that is growing more fragmented by the hour.
But consider our situation as though from above. We are a species of social primate that produces culture. And culture constitutes almost everything we care about. There's material culture, all of our stuff. This includes our cities, our technology, and all of our virtual stuff too. Our digital lives are just more stuff. And then there's this invisible framework of beliefs and values and norms and expectations that shape how we live and think, usually without our conscious awareness.
But culture is not merely art and architecture and science and religion and language and technology, though it expresses itself through all of these things. It's the operating system of a society. The assumptions we share about what is true and what is good, and what is sacred, and what is evil. It includes our notions of beauty and justice, transmitted across generations and reinforced through institutions and encoded in everything from our most profound literature to whatever Sydney Sweeney is doing right now. And while we tend to inherit culture passively, it profoundly influences how we interpret the world, how we treat one another, and even what we're capable of aspiring to be in the privacy of our own minds. When you wake up at 4:00 in the morning and begin ruminating about your life, worrying about your finances or about whether you're a good enough spouse or parent. Culture is there imposing its weight on you.
The point is we are not merely ourselves. Each of us is also a creation and creator of culture. There's no boundary between our minds at this moment and the chain of society in which we live. We're building culture right now together in this room and tearing other parts of it down. And of course, it matters what kind of culture we create and what parts of it we destroy.
In particular, I think the most important part of culture is our shared beliefs about what is real. This subsumes all of our claims to knowledge of the past and our expectations of the future. Our common understanding of the world is what makes peaceful collaboration possible. And this is what has begun to unravel in recent years. We simply no longer live in a shared reality. As creators of culture, we have an opportunity, we might even say we have a responsibility to make the future better than the past, or at least not worse for ourselves, for our kids, for our friends, for perfect strangers, and for generations to come. Given our place in history, we have a greater opportunity to do this than any of the 100 billion people who came before us. Unfortunately, we also have a greater opportunity to fail and to ruin everything.
Now I'm going to assume for the purposes of this talk that we share some core values. I'm not inclined to waste a lot of time trying to justify these values to people who do not share them. We value things like political freedom and political equality. We want clean air and clean water. We want institutions we can trust. None of us wants to be on an airplane at 40,000 feet, only to learn that the pilot knows most of what he knows about aviation from listening to podcasts. The difference between knowledge and ignorance is real, and it often matters. The difference between consider the difference between swimming and drowning, for instance. It is not a difference of effort. It's quite possible that the man who is drowning is expending much more energy than a swimmer. But the difference lies in understanding what works. Expertise is a thing, and so is talent. Not all opinions are equally valid. Many of our cherished beliefs are false.

The difference between what we want to be true and what is true is rather often impressive. Reality is a certain way whether we know it or not.

Now, is this emerging picture of our epistemology elitist? Yes. But so what? For things that really matter, I want people who know more about those things than I do to be in charge. Our intellectual and moral integrity depends on our admitting distinctions of this kind. Yet across the political spectrum, the values that produce intellectual and moral integrity are under siege. If you go far enough in either direction, left or right, you are guaranteed to be surrounded by identity-obsessed tribalists and conspiracy freaks and anti-Semites and people who think that almost nothing in our civilization is worth preserving. Above all, you encounter false certainties. And paradoxically, the people who are most certain that they know what is real are the most disparaging of expertise and mainstream science and institutional knowledge.

We need to return to the principles of reason and skepticism and ethical seriousness and scientific curiosity that we barely got in hand sometime around the 17th century. And we need to recognize how easily these principles can be lost.

Now, as I said, if you go far enough in either direction politically, you meet people who are obsessed with identity, their own and everybody else's. But a politics based on identity is bound to be unethical because ethics by definition has to be universal. Something can't be right or wrong simply because you happen to be who you are. That's not ethics, that's psychopathy.

How we think about ourselves in relation to others, the stories we tell about our lives and our life projects, the images we form of our place in the world. All of this can seem important. But I would argue that having a strong identity is something that only children should fully embrace. Like many things that are appropriate and even necessary for children, identity is something that we want to ultimately outgrow. And a failure to outgrow it is psychologically and politically toxic.

For instance, I'm a cisgendered, heterosexual white male, or so I've been told. By the light of the Nuremberg laws, I'm also half Jewish, though I'm fully Jewish according to the rabbinical ones. I'm also 5’9” tall on a good day. According to my driver's license, I weigh 170 lbs. Though I expect you'd have to remove my liver to make that strictly true. While I don't consider myself a Buddhist, you would know far more about me by mistaking me for one than by knowing most other true facts about me. I am a husband and father of two girls, so I can attest that a certain degree of gender imbalance in any organization works to the disadvantage of the minority. I can assure you that whatever gravitas I manage to conjure on a public stage is quickly scorched from me the moment I enter the blast furnace of my own home. I am quite tone deaf, so while my rendition of Happy Birthday can be seen for all its sincerity, it is never quite heard. I'm wealthy by any rational definition of that term, but of course not at all wealthy when I compare myself to the richest people in our society. And yet when compared to 99% of humanity, our financial concerns are equally imaginary.

Now, you'll notice that only some of these facts about me signify any sort of identity that society cares about. If I preface an opinion on some polarizing topic by saying, "Well, as a right-handed person with blue eyes," this would mark me as a bad comedian or a lunatic. Society does not care that I may identify as a lover of Indian food, but it does care, and it insists that I care, that I am white, that I am a cisgendered heterosexual man, that I am Jewish, and that I'm wealthy. But this is a mistake. It's an understandable mistake. There's no mystery to how we got here, endlessly obsessing about race and sex and gender and religion and wealth. But it's an ethical and political dead end.

Consider the topics of race and racism in America. There was once a time when it made perfect sense to accuse most white Americans of being racist, or if not racist themselves, tolerant of racism and racist policies to a degree that made them culpable for a terrible injustice. We had a civil rights movement to address these harms, and nearly two generations of affirmative action.

More important, we witnessed a sea change in social attitudes. For instance, public acceptance of interracial marriage in the 1950s was around 5%. In 2021, it was 94%. To have only 6% of the population still lurking on the wrong side of history is what it looks like to live in a country where racism has been defeated. And we shouldn't wait for a 100% result to declare victory. It's literally impossible to construct a poll that produces a lower percentage of idiots than this. Last I looked, 11% of Americans believed the moon landing was a hoax. We had a two-term black president. This was not mere tokenism. It was the obliteration of race as a real obstacle to political power in this country.

So much has changed. The moral high ground is now so obvious that I believe that any mention of race in our politics has become counterproductive. Right? It wasn't counterproductive in 1964, but it is now. Because we know where we want to be as a society. We know what it means for a society to be healthy with respect to the variable of race. And we know the psychological and social attitudes that both constitute this health and safeguard it. We know the answer to one of the most pressing moral questions we have ever had to face. And the answer is this. We should not care about race. We should not care about racial difference. The color of a person's skin should be like the color of their eyes or their hair. These things are noticeable, and the diversity is beautiful, but these differences have no ethical or political consequence. We know that truly caring about skin color is noxious and absurd. And continuing to care about it for the purpose of social activism is a mistake because continuing to care about race simply isn't a way of ceasing to care about it. And yet millions of Americans believe that it's far too soon to say this, and that we must care and care and care some more about race and about other superficial tribal differences. The truth is we must grow politically disenchanted by human difference. And in particular, we must teach our children never to become enchanted by it.

Now we tend to talk about identity politics only on the left, but it's important to notice that whether you go left or right in our politics, you eventually arrive at an obsession with identity. On the right, we call it white supremacy or ethno-nationalism or Christian nationalism. On the left, it's intersectionality or social justice or just identity politics. But in both cases, you find people who really believe that we are permanently divided and should be permanently divided by superficial characteristics, by skin color and sexual preference and ethnicity. These are people for whom, when they hear about some act of violence and are given all the morally and legally salient details, right, who attacked who and why, whether one person was clearly the aggressor, whether anyone had a weapon. You can describe it as exhaustively as you like, and they still won't know quite how they feel about it until they learn the color of the skin of the various parties involved. That is obscene. That is a bug, not a feature of our political and social and moral psychology. If an act of violence is wrong, it is wrong regardless of a person's race.

Now, as I said, identity politics fails the test of universality, which is the only rational foundation for ethics, or for any conception of basic fairness. It also ignores factual evidence and rational argument whenever it's convenient or comforting to do so. Identity politics produces the very opposite of the wisdom of the crowd. It just amplifies the fears and hatreds and delusions of the mob.

Now, I want to focus for a few minutes on the politics of the mob that is currently ascendant in America, and that is the authoritarian populism of Donald Trump. Now, much has been said about President Trump. Some of it has been unfair and untrue, which is strange because there is absolutely no reason to lie when enumerating this man's faults. Trump has the attack surface of a planet. But think of the qualities we would want in a leader who has been given more power and responsibility than any person on earth. Wisdom, self-control, a modicum of self-knowledge, a deep understanding of the world, and an awareness of the limits of that understanding. And a resulting desire to surround themselves with the most competent people they can find. A sincere

commitment to the common good, compassion, moral and intellectual clarity, or just basic decency. Wouldn't that be amazing? It's very hard to think of a public figure who lacks these qualities more conspicuously than President Trump does. And so it's no surprise, really, that he's using the power of the presidency, both at home and abroad, capriciously, vindictively, wantonly to attack his perceived enemies and to enrich himself and his family in ways that are without precedent in American history. Trump is not merely the most corrupt president we've ever had. He's the first to be contemptuous of the very idea of America. Of course, I offer these observations not merely as my opinion, much less as evidence of my Trump derangement syndrome, but as statements of fact. And if you don't believe them, if you doubt the truth of them, I think you've been misinformed. We simply know too much about this man. We know too much about who he was prior to entering politics. We know what he cares about and what he absolutely does not care about. Trump's character has been visible for decades. His avarice, his cruelty, his fathomless dishonesty. In fact, one of the only things that can be said in Trump's favor is that is that though he lies about everything, he has never even pretended to be a good person. The man's not a hypocrite. He pretended to be rich when he wasn't. But being a good person is not something he cares about. The real Trump derangement syndrome is to believe that none of these things matter.

The character of the president matters because all of his decisions are downstream of who he is. We can't anticipate every challenge our country is going to face in the next three years, but we can know in advance how a greedy and ruthless, ignorant, and profoundly distractible man will respond to these challenges. Suboptimally. I mean, in a moment when the world is in desperate need of leadership, when the threats to global order are growing, wars of aggression, and mass migration, and loss of trust in institutions, and a waning commitment to democracy, and the emergence of artificial intelligence with all of its implications for warmaking and the spreading of social disorder. And yes, climate change, that afterthought of an afterthought. To say nothing of the ever-present threat of nuclear war, which appears worse now than at any point since the Cuban Missile Crisis. When we need sane leadership to solve global problems and to mitigate global risks, our country is being transformed by the whims of one man into the most powerful banana republic the world has ever seen.

And the way that Trump has privileged loyalty over every other trait has acted like a sieve through which no truly ethical person can pass. He has attracted people into his service who are distinguished not by their competence, much less for their probity, but for their willingness to be humiliated again and again by being forced to say things they know to be untrue. Or at least they would be humiliated if they had any scruples. Remember the cabinet secretaries and members of Congress who were obliged to pretend that Ukraine had started the war with Russia once Trump blurted this out for no apparent reason. I'm convinced he didn't mean to say this. He was just vomiting words, as he does. And he said, they shouldn't have started it. And you, if you watch the footage, it really seems that he just stumbled into this. Trump's way of speaking is the verbal equivalent of inflating a balloon and then just letting it go. To fly around the room. But once Trump claimed that Ukraine had started the war with Russia, which is a piece of just pure insanity, not even Putin claims this. But once Trump said it, his loyal courtiers were obliged to do the same. This is what is so debasing and corrupting and scary and genuinely new in America, at least about Trumpism. That the problem isn't just Trump, this game show host who can't keep his lies straight. It's the acquiescence to him by the Republican Party, obviously, but now by business leaders and law firms and elite institutions. The role that cowardice is playing here, even for those who have every opportunity to maintain their principles without personal sacrifice, is really hard to exaggerate. Of course, abject displays of cowardice are quite common under tyranny, but they also pave the way to it.

It's difficult to overstate how much brand damage has been done to America in the last eight months. We were once a country who stood for universal human values. We weren't perfect. We do indeed have a lot to apologize for. It's been 250 years, we have a checkered past. But our failures have been measured against ideals that we really did stand for and inspired others to stand for. On our best days, we could credibly be said to care about whether other nations invaded their neighbors or rigged their elections or murdered their journalists or disappeared their political dissidents or treated women and girls like cattle. Those best days are behind us. We are now a nation that simply demands that the president and his rapacious family get a hotel deal in your capital city, or that you give these tacky hustlers millions of dollars directly by purchasing their memecoin. Trump just slapped a 50% tariff on India, the world's largest democracy and the country that we've been trying to build better relations with for at least 30 years because Narendra Modi declined to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize. This is not normal politics or governance. This is a protection racket. Where do we go to get our country's reputation back?

Of course, it remains to be seen whether all that Trump has done is legal. His deployment of troops on American streets, incarcerating people without due process, imposing tariffs seemingly on every member of our species, gutting consumer protections, the senseless destruction of our public health system, a truly incomprehensible assault on American science. The funding cuts to medical and scientific research are acts of pure masochism. If anyone knows the MAGA safe word, now would be a good time to shout it out. Purging military leaders for political reasons, firing government workers for reporting accurate economic data, unleashing the Justice Department on his critics. Some of this mayhem has been ruled illegal already, and there are hundreds of court cases still pending. One of the first things Trump did was fire the inspectors general, the very people whose job it is to fight corruption in our government. That was probably illegal. And much of what Dozh did was probably against the law, too. Certainly much of it was corrupt. Elon Musk's conflicts of interest in that role were astounding. He was prowling the halls of American power like the High Sparrow in Game of Thrones, as his team of incels lawlessly ransacked government servers. This could have been the worst theft of sensitive data in our history, and we still don't know what Elon was doing with it. The optics of Dozh mattered quite a lot. I mean ask yourself, if you were the richest person on earth, tasked with making decisions that would immediately harm some of the poorest people on earth, as kids with HIV or tuberculosis or malaria lost access to life-saving medication, or as you recklessly doxxed our Afghan allies, leaving them the Taliban to torture their families. Would you devote your days and nights to shitposting on X? Would you refer to all the civil servants and healthcare workers and development staff whose lives and projects you had just upended as criminals? Would you describe your dismantling of the largest source of aid to the developing world as quote "feeding it into the woodchipper when you'd rather be partying"? And when you learn that one of the engineers who you've hired to do this onerous work is a committed racist, would you poll your audience on X to figure out whether to fire her? And what would you do when you discovered that nearly 80% of your fans on X, who you've cultivated over years of your idiotic trolling, actually have a soft spot for racism? And then, let's just say you happen to express your heartfelt love for a crowd with a spontaneous Nazi salute or two. Would you, might you, while shouldering the greatest responsibility for public service a private citizen has ever known, might you make some effort to communicate that your heart is actually in the right place? Of course not. No, this is the time to lie about everything and pointlessly defame people and make Nazi jokes on X. The greatest role model we have in tech, and in business generally, or that the person who's actually most likely to become the first trillionaire, has become a dangerous clown. But what is most alarming is that half of our country isn't just tolerating this

frenzied unraveling of American stature and moral influence. They're celebrating it. Our capacity for distraction has been weaponized against us. And we seem to care about nothing apart from not being bored. But boredom has genuinely been abolished. Nothing is boring. But it's becoming almost impossible to figure out what is real. I mean, are we really going to conquer Greenland? Or Canada? Is Canada going to be the 51st state? No. Or President Trump and Tulsi Gabbard, his Director of National Intelligence, accused President Obama of treason, a crime that is potentially punishable by death. Is that real? And where does this hyperbolic discounting of everything the president says end? Right, when when I debated Ben Shapiro prior to the election, he assured me that Trump's stated goal of imposing 20% tariffs on many of our allies was just bluster. Never going to happen. Well, how's that worked out? I mean, how did we get to a place where we are repeatedly telling one another not to care what the President of the United States says he's going to do? I mean, how has that made sense to anyone? Instead of a sane and sober and honest engagement with reality, we have created a culture of tribalism and loyalty tests and conspiracy thinking, the combination of which is almost a new form of religion. And like religion, it offers the comforts of certainty and belonging and mutual antipathies, all at the expense of real freedom of thought. So we're living through a crisis, not just of politics, but of epistemology. There's simply no way to reason with somebody who thinks that all the experts are lying and nothing is as it seems. And when millions of people hold such beliefs, the foundation for our cooperation begins to crumble. "Do your own research" is not a formula for a functioning civilization. Unless we find a way to restore our shared understanding of the world, anchored to reason and evidence and honesty, and yes, to institutions in expensive buildings staffed with well-educated employees who we can trust, we will continue to drift apart, and life will get worse in all kinds of ways.

But of course, the Democrats, to say nothing of the far left, can't be trusted to make sense either. And many of you who have been enjoying the scorn I just heaped upon our dear leader and his cult might now get a chance to feel uncomfortable. Consider this your trigger warning. The truth is, I largely blame the left for the fact that there's a Trump president in the first place. I mean, if we slide into fascism in America, the left will be in part responsible. Right? They're not the party of murder, but they are the party of moral confusion. I mean, take the topic of crime and policing. Abolish the police was perhaps the most self-destructive political slogan to appear in my lifetime. And in case there was any doubt about whether people were really committed to this stupidity, on June 12th, 2020, with many Black Lives Matter protests devolving into riots and looting and arson across the nation, The New York Times published an op-ed titled, "Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police." Or consider immigration. Denying the chaos at the southern border and calling any concern about it racist was probably even dumber than chanting abolish the police. And then there is trans activism. Now, of course, there should be political equality for everyone with gender dysphoria. But when a popular Harvard professor is hounded out of her job for merely stating that there are two biological sexes, male and female, defined by their gametes, something's gone terribly wrong in our culture. And there are probably many reasons why Kamala Harris isn't president of the United States at this moment, but not being able to disavow her prior support for taxpayer-funded gender reassignment surgery for incarcerated illegal immigrants is certainly one of them. That was the political equivalent of an SNL sketch wrapped in an Onion article.

However, I want to focus on another strand of lunacy that will damage our politics for many years to come, and that is how the left has responded to all of the suffering in this world caused by militant Islam. And before wading further into this morass, we need to make a few distinctions. There's a difference between people and ideas. There's also a difference between an identity that a person acquires merely by accepting certain ideas and one that is passed on

by circumstances of their birth. For example, to say that someone is Japanese is to make a claim about their genetics and their ancestry. Right? It may it's making a claim about where their ancestors actually lived. If you tell me that someone is Japanese, I actually know something about their great-grandparents, by definition. If you tell me that a person is Marxist or an astrologer, you're telling me about their mental life, or lack thereof. In any case, you're talking about their beliefs and desires and attitudes. So that's one distinction. People and their indelible characteristics on the one hand, and ideas and beliefs and practices that can be adopted or rejected on the other.

Now, religions are systems of ideas and beliefs and practices, and they are not the same. Now, for some reason, this is taboo to say among secular liberals. Religious conservatives know that not all religions are the same, because of course, theirs is the only true one. But for some reason, secular liberals imagine that all religions are equally wise and loving or equally irrelevant. Unfortunately, this simply isn't true. And so this is the second crucial distinction. Religions differ in many, many important ways. The term religion is a term like sport. Right? Each names a wide class of very dissimilar things. If you tell me you have two nephews and they are both elite athletes, and I must fight one of them, I'm not quite sure why you're telling me that, but let's just go with it. And the first is a professional boxer who just won the middleweight title. And the second just won the Kentucky Derby. He's not the horse. I'm pretty sure I know which one I'm going to pick. I mean, details matter. And even seemingly small differences between religions can matter quite a lot.

For instance, Islam is intrinsically political in a way that Christianity isn't. One reason for this is there's no passage in the Quran analogous to the line that is repeated in each of the three synoptic gospels, "Render unto Caesar those things that are Caesar's and unto God those things that are God's." Now, while I'm not denying that there have been Christian theocracies in the past and there are Christians even now who would aspire to theocracy, for 2,000 years, this single sentence has offered a clear theological basis for a separation of church and state. No such separation exists within Islam. And there are many reasons for this. The main one being that Muhammad was both a prophet and a political and military leader. Now, it's true, you can find him in two different moods in the Quran. He preached for 22 years in very different circumstances. And the first is as a fringe religious reformer in Mecca, and then later as a conquering warlord in Medina. So when Muhammad was powerless and experiencing ridicule and persecution, he tended to preach patience and forgiveness and persuasion and religious freedom. But when he finally became a leader of men, actively spreading the faith by the sword, he preached Islamic supremacy and jihad. Now, unfortunately, the later verses are generally thought to supersede the earlier ones, theologically. And this isn't an accident. There are two verses in the Quran that suggest that they do. Consequently, there's a pattern that tends to repeat itself across cultures. Wherever Islam is powerful, its attitude toward unbelievers tends to be belligerent. And wherever Islam is growing in power, its belligerence towards non-Muslims also tends to grow. Given what's actually in the scripture, in the Quran and the Hadith and the biography of Muhammad, this is not at all surprising.

Of course, Islam is often described by its apologists in the West as a religion of peace. It's true that the word Islam can mean peace in certain contexts, but the connotation here has nothing to do with non-violence or tolerance of diversity or cooperation with unbelievers. The more accurate translation of Islam is submission. And the peace of Islam is the inner peace felt by those who submit to the one true God and to the edicts of his final revelation. These details matter. On the left, one often hears about the problem of Islamophobia. And what I'm saying now would be considered a rather fulminating instance of it. But the term, the term Islamophobia is often used as though it were analogous to anti-Semitism. But here, the specific differences

between religions and a failure to distinguish between people and ideas is producing a lot of confusion.
For instance, as a religion, Judaism is non-proselytizing. In the general case, the way you become a Jew is that you're born one, right? Because your mother was born one. So Jews themselves, along with the people who hate them, tend to agree about at least one thing. Being Jewish is a little like being Japanese. It has ethnic and racial implications, at least most of the time. Now, it's possible to convert to Judaism, but almost nobody does this because Jews don't tend to make it very easy. And the circumcision thing, it's not a small thing. But the point is that Jews are not trying to spread their faith, right, beyond encouraging people who are already Jewish by virtue of birth to take their religion more seriously and have kids who will do the same. And as a result, there are only 15 million Jews on earth. Now, conversely, Islam is an aggressively missionary faith that has nothing in principle to do with a person's ethnicity or race. There are over two billion Muslims, a quarter of the world's population. There are over 50 Muslim-majority countries. Now, on the left, people worry a lot about the legacy of colonialism. Well, Muslims have been among the most successful colonizers. The fact that the Middle East and North Africa and Persia and much of South Asia are almost entirely Muslim is due to an impressively bloody history of armed conquest and persecution and rape and enslavement. The West has never had a monopoly on these things. We tend to forget that the Crusades were actually a response to the fact that Islam conquered most of the Christian world in the first few hundred years after the death of the Prophet.
This is why the concepts of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are not at all analogous.
Anti-Semitism, or better described as Jew hatred, is an ancient form of bigotry. It has clear roots in Christian and Muslim theology, where it's mainly concerned with the fact that Jews persist as Jews and won't convert to Christianity or Islam. To stay Jewish in a world where Christianity and Islam have been revealed and are perpetually seeking converts is to insult both religions because both religions insist that their doctrines subsume and supersede Judaism itself. And Jews have maintained this provocation for thousands of years, merely by remaining Jews. Now, sometime around the 19th century, hatred of Jews became a more explicitly a matter of race. So today, anti-Semitism is more a form of racism plus some crazy conspiracy theories.
Islamophobia is a very different concept. As someone once said on the internet, and no, it was not Christopher Hitchens, although it should have been, Islamophobia is a word invented by fascists and used by cowards to manipulate morons. However, it's not far from the truth. Whatever the origins of the word, it functions to blur the line between criticizing specific doctrines within Islam and hating Muslims as people based on their race or ethnicity or some other indelible characteristic. It makes arguing for secularism and for freedom of thought, and even for the basic human rights of women and girls in the face of Islamic theocracy, seem like a form of bigotry. And it has pretty much destroyed the moral intuitions of the left. Criticizing Islam as a system of ideas is not bigotry. And noticing the effect of these ideas on the world isn't either. No more so than criticizing communism is a form of bigotry.
As many of you know, my concern about Islam is longstanding and born of the contradiction, as I see it, between certain of its doctrines and the core values of open societies. Now, of course, we can admit that many, many Muslims live peacefully within open societies, and that is a very good thing. We're all counting on these hundreds of millions, at least, well over a billion, I would imagine, Muslims to eventually reform their religion and moderate it. But when the doctrine of Islam is taken seriously, in the way that many Muslims take it seriously, it presents specific challenges to liberal values, especially with respect to freedom of speech and gender equality and freedom of thought. At this moment in history, we simply must understand all the ways in which open societies can fail. And one way they can fail, or never develop in the first place, is to

have too many people in them believing that the Quran is the literal word of God. Of course, jihadism is the most extreme expression of a fanatical commitment to Islam. We euphemistically describe the violence of jihadists as terrorism. But when viewed from the side of the jihadists themselves, the atrocities they commit against innocent people are nothing less than acts of worship. So while jihadists constitute a small minority of all Muslims, their aspirations are perfectly orthodox, and therefore they're often widely supported. The belief that infidels and apostates are fit only for the fires of hell, and that waging holy war against them is a religious duty, and that martyrdom in this cause offers a direct path to paradise. These are not fringe ideas within Islam. Rather, they're every bit as canonical as the virgin birth or the resurrection in Christianity. This is why Muslims can find it difficult to disavow the nihilistic brutality of so-called terrorists, and why jihadism remains a menace throughout much of the world. We have seen Muslims by the hundreds of thousands in scores of countries protest the slightest perceived insult to their faith. Cartoons, the naming of a teddy bear. Burn a Quran today and embassies in a dozen countries could well burn tomorrow. But where have been all the protests over the countless atrocities committed by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State and Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab and the Taliban and Hezbollah and Hamas? There's a terrifying inversion of priorities here that we can't lose sight of. And the moral confusion about all this on the left has been obvious for decades. The fatwa against Salman Rushdie in 1989 was a moment where we could clearly see it. We had leading authors and public intellectuals castigating a British novelist for having the temerity to write critically about Islam. Germaine Greer, Cat Stevens, John le Carré, all were on the wrong side of this transparent assault upon their most basic artistic and intellectual freedoms. Even President Jimmy Carter, on whose watch the American hostage crisis had unfolded in Tehran, had harsh words for Rushdie. In the New York Times, he wrote, "While Rushdie's First Amendment freedoms are important, thank you, Mr. President, we have tended to promote him and his book with a little acknowledgment that it is a direct insult to those millions of Muslims whose sacred beliefs have been violated." That was a former US president writing in the New York Times in 1989. Now, as you know, Salman was nearly murdered on stage 33 years later by a man who felt just that way, that his sacred beliefs had been violated by a novel he hadn't read. The problem of militant Islam recedes from the news, and some of you might wonder why I'm even talking about it. But it never goes away. Today is the 24th anniversary of September 11th, 2001, which is what most of us think about when we think about jihadist terrorism. But there have been nearly 70,000 terrorist attacks perpetrated by Muslim fanatics in the last 50 years, and most of these have occurred in the last decade. We just tend to notice all this pointless carnage unless it's happening on American soil or in the capitals of Europe. Almost all of this violence occurs in the Middle East and Africa and South Asia. And vast numbers of the victims are Muslims themselves.

Now, there are many factors that create moral confusion about this on the left. There's a quasi-Marxist narrative of oppressors and oppressed that contaminates everything. There's this inclination to see the world through an American lens, as though the struggle for civil rights for black Americans has some relevance to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or to the ongoing challenges of Muslim immigration and assimilation in Europe. However, the left has also has a long history of being directly manipulated by apologists for Islam. And the consequences of this manipulation have never been more dire. Again, the problem is not merely with Islam. It is the moral blindness of the left. And the way that the combination of these two things inspires a counter-reaction on the right. If secular liberals can't stop the spread of Islamic theocracy, especially in Western Europe, we will see the rise of something very ugly on the right that will be willing to do it.

Now, for some reason, the left has no problem understanding that the beliefs of fundamentalist

Christians affect their politics and behavior. The opposition to abortion or same-sex marriage or to the teaching of evolution, you know, caveman views about gender roles or an unwavering support for Israel based on apocalyptic prophecy. The left understands that Christian beliefs have consequences. But somehow the doctrines of Islam are never to blame for anything. Once again, the distinction between criticizing ideas and dehumanizing people is essential. And maintaining this distinction is how we can defend secular liberal values without lapsing into bigotry or xenophobia. But we have to be honest with ourselves. Open societies cannot tolerate the spread of Islamic fanaticism indefinitely. And in this context, I view Israel as a front-line state in a civilizational clash between liberal democracies and militant Islam. And the recent war in Gaza is the most tragic and destructive instance of that clash. The suffering in Gaza is horrific. There's no denying that. For some reason, people don't think they hear me say that. One could certainly make the case that the invasion of Gaza was a terrible mistake. First, for all the suffering and death that has caused, but also because all this suffering and death was exactly what Hamas wanted. And if you're doing exactly what your enemy wants, it stands to reason that you should take a moment to think about whether you're doing the wrong thing. The truth is, I've never known how Israel should respond or should have responded to the events of October 7th. I just know that they, along with every other free society, must defeat militant Islam. The question of how we do this is genuinely debatable. But that isn't the real point of contention on the left. On the left, worrying about militant Islam, even in Israel, even in the aftermath of the worst slaughter of Jews since the Holocaust, is just more Islamophobia. It's just more colonialism and racism, as though that charge made any sense in the Middle East.

And it's frankly unclear how any war, no matter how necessary, could be fought today without provoking serious controversy in an age of social media. Because whatever the strategic or political reality, and no matter how clear the moral high ground, images of dead children nullify any argument. And unlike other recent conflicts in which tens of thousands of non-combatants have died, or even those in which hundreds of thousands have died, the images of death and suffering in Gaza have been relentlessly spread everywhere for the purpose of delegitimizing the state of Israel. Whatever your media diet or online habits, you have not been inundated with images of all the dead women and children in Yemen or Syria or Sudan. But you've probably seen a lot from Gaza. The world simply does not care when Muslims kill other Muslims, but it really cares when Jews do it. And while Israel has been winning this war against Hamas and Hezbollah and Iran, it has totally lost the information war. In fact, it's failed to even wage it. So its reputation, wherever it wasn't already destroyed by anti-Semitism, has been destroyed by both preposterous lies—there have been many, many lies that the world has been eager to believe—and by truths that most people have no inclination to think about rationally.

While Israeli bombs and bullets have been the proximate cause of most of the suffering in Gaza, the real onus rests on the death cult that is Hamas and on the Palestinians who support it. Unfortunately, the line between Hamas and Palestinian culture is not as clear as many hope. Thousands of ordinary Palestinians came across the border on October 7th to help mutilate and murder innocent civilians and take hostages. And ordinary Palestinians by the thousands celebrated those atrocities. Ordinary Palestinian families have kept hostages imprisoned in their homes. Yes, there are Palestinians who hate Hamas and want to live secular lives that we would find recognizable. So these people are effectively hostages in Gaza, too. But many Palestinians and many Muslims throughout the world don't want what most secular liberals think they want. Now, Israel has also made terrible mistakes in how it has fought the war in Gaza, and is probably making other mistakes right now. It never should have restricted food to the region in an effort to put pressure on Hamas. And it should never have put its soldiers in situations where they were bound to kill civilians unnecessarily. For instance, when distributing that food to a

population that is not only hostile but harboring jihadists who are trying to maximize the loss of civilian life on their own side.
Whatever Israel's flaws, and there are many, whatever crimes it may have committed, and those should absolutely be prosecuted, it remains a pluralistic democracy committed to values that its enemies despise. Free speech and women's rights and gay rights and pluralism and scientific progress. Most of Israel's critics, especially those on the left, can't seem to tell the difference between a flawed democracy and a death cult. And there are many moral illusions that creep in here. For instance, people naturally notice the asymmetrical levels of death and destruction on the two sides of this conflict, and they consider that difference to be morally relevant. But this penalizes Israel for protecting its civilian population with missile defenses and bomb shelters. And it rewards Hamas for intentionally sacrificing the lives of its own non-combatants. I mean, if there were thousands of dead Israeli children being pulled out of the rubble in Tel Aviv, as Hamas and Hezbollah and the Houthis and Iran absolutely intended there to be, what would the world be talking about? Would people still believe there had been a genocide in Gaza?
Hamas has used the suffering and death of civilians in Gaza as their primary weapon in this war. I mean, they could end the killing tomorrow by releasing the hostages. And yet they don't. They're content to let their own civilians suffer and die, all the while protecting themselves in tunnels built for that purpose, using billions of dollars of foreign aid that was meant for the Palestinian people. Hamas spent nearly two decades building these tunnels. They are 300 miles long and hundreds of feet deep. They have tens of thousands of entrances in schools and hospitals and mosques and homes. They're provisioned with food and fuel. They are air conditioned. They're probably the largest purpose-built bomb shelter our species has ever constructed. And yet as far as we know, no Palestinian civilians have been allowed into them. Why? Because the tunnels were built for the purpose of waging jihad, and the Palestinians are meant to die as martyrs. It's crucial that we understand the mind of a jihadist. From a jihadist's point of view, death is not a problem. All true Muslims who get killed in this war, and this includes the children, will go to paradise. That's not a problem. And all the Jews and infidels and apostates who die will go to hell where they belong. As hard as it might be to believe, this is the thinking that governs the conflict in Gaza. Gaza is a hell on earth because of Hamas and because of the wider culture of religious fanaticism that supports Hamas. You might think Hamas is as sadistic and as insane as it is because of how badly the Palestinians have been treated by Israel. But that simply isn't true. And the similar character of every other jihadist death cult proves this. The Islamic State was worse than Hamas, and it had nothing to do with Israel. Different war, same problem.
And while there are religious fanatics among the Israelis, there remains a stark difference between the two sides. Everything that could be said against Netanyahu and his government and his collaboration with the far right notwithstanding, I believe that the following statement remains true. If the Palestinians laid down their arms today, there would be peace in the region. There could be a two-state solution, there could be a one-state solution. It wouldn't matter. If the Palestinians simply stopped killing Jews and stopped creating a culture that celebrates pointless murder and martyrdom as its highest values, there could be a diverse, tolerant, and prosperous society between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea right now. There could have been one 80 years ago. However, if the Israelis laid down their weapons, there would be a genocide. This was clearly true on October 7th. And for anyone who's been paying attention to the region, it has been true on every day since the founding of the state of Israel. Hamas expressed its genocidal aspirations very clearly in its founding charter. None of this is a secret. It's only a secret in the West among secular liberals who have been lied to and who are simply desperate to believe that all the world's suffering is the result of Western aggression and greed and

intolerance. There's no question that Israeli society is being brutalized by this war, that it's made more brutal by it. And if Israeli politics is ever subsumed by a millenarian death cult, which is not impossible, if the culture of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv ever mirrored the fanaticism of Gaza and the West Bank, well then the basis for preferring the Israeli side in this conflict would disappear. But that is simply not the situation at present.

Now, in moving from badmouthing Islam to the war in Gaza, and soon to the Holocaust, get ready, I am mindful of the fact that in addition to putting you all into a clinical depression, I seem to be lurching from one topic to the next that has special importance for Jews, having insisted that my thinking is totally unconstrained by my Jewish identity. So let me perform a little psychic surgery on any of you who might be worried about this. And first, let me remind you that I've always been extraordinarily critical of the religion of Judaism. In fact, I've said that its scripture, books like Leviticus and Deuteronomy and Exodus, is if anything worse than the Quran. It just so happens that there are extra-scriptural reasons why even ultra-Orthodox Jews don't live by its logic, right? Killing people for working on the Sabbath, for instance. But if the Messiah actually does come back and rebuilds the temple and reconvenes the Sanhedrin, you will see some very crazy Jews living some very crazy lives. And suffice it to say, I will not be a fan. I've even pointed out that Jewish identity and Jewish sectarianism, the whole "chosen people" myth, has been a direct source of anti-Semitism, because Jews have spent the last 2,000 years collaborating with people who see them as different and form a suspicion about them on that basis, by seeing themselves as irretrievably so. I've repudiated the biblical claims to real estate of the Israeli settlers. So I've said many things which, if I were not Jewish myself, could get me accused of anti-Semitism. Again, I see the ongoing conflict between Israel and the various jihadist regimes that surround it as part of a more generic struggle between militant Islam and open societies everywhere. And so the fact that Israel is Jewish has always been totally irrelevant to me. If you look at what I said and wrote after September 11th or after the Danish cartoon controversy or after the Charlie Hebdo massacre in Paris, my concern about Islamic extremism has nothing to do with Judaism. And I'm not in the slightest arguing in support of Jewish identity politics here. But since October 7th, my support for Israel has been given further impetus by the rise of anti-Semitism that we see all around us now.

I mean, there are some profoundly illiberal forces at work in at least three areas on our political landscape: the far left, the far right, and Islam. And the delusion and malevolence of each seems to achieve a laser-like intensity when focused on the question, "What should we do about the Jews?" The fact that this is even a question is pure madness. No one is asking the question, "What should we do about the Cambodians?" The General Assembly of the UN and its Human Rights Council have passed more resolutions against Israel than against all other countries combined, including North Korea and Iran and Russia and China and Syria and Sudan and Yemen. A few of these countries have committed actual genocides. None of this makes sense, but this is the world we're living in.

Now, why does anti-Semitism matter? Well, for Jews, it's obvious why it matters, but why should it matter to everyone? Well, it matters because when you look at what anti-Semites also hate, you find that they hate everything that makes culturally rich, diverse, open societies possible. Whether they're Muslim theocrats or Christian nationalists or blood and soil fascists or Marxist revolutionaries, anti-Semites hate liberalism and equality before the law and meritocracy and reasoned discourse and scientific skepticism and human values that can be generalized. Real anti-Semites bring with them more than just their hatred of Jews. They bring censorship and political repression and conspiracy thinking and the politics of scapegoating. So to cry out against anti-Semitism is not an act of special pleading. It is a defense of the moral and institutional architecture that makes truly free societies possible.

Unfortunately, the atrocities committed by Hamas on October 7th revealed a level of Jew hatred globally that shocked even those of us who have been students of anti-Semitism for much of our lives. Crucially, this hatred showed itself before Israel had invaded Gaza. While the corpses of the young people at the Nova music festival were still being identified, we had students at Harvard and professors at Columbia and demonstrators in New York and London and Sydney racing to celebrate their killers. I've lived most of my life believing that dangerous anti-Semitism was behind us. Unfortunately, the global response to October 7th has put that assumption very much in doubt. And in this regard, alternative media has a lot to answer for. In recent years, I've complained rather incessantly about the behavior of friends and former friends who have large public platforms. And this has caused some people to worry that I might be against freedom of speech. So let me take a moment to clarify this.

Every open society regulates speech to some degree. And most are far more restrictive than America is. Liberal democracies like Germany and Denmark and England and Canada and New Zealand prohibit so-called hate speech and other forms of expression that they consider to be socially toxic. Now, I think these efforts are almost always misguided. And what's been happening in England recently just seems patently insane. People arrested and even some thrown in prison for things they have posted on social media. So in my view, we are very lucky to have the First Amendment in the United States. But the First Amendment simply ensures that with a few narrow exceptions, a person can't be jailed or otherwise abused by the government for thinking out loud. It doesn't offer any guidance to publishers or platforms about which ideas they should spread. And contrary to what many people imagine, there are no free speech absolutists doing business in America. I mean, even 4chan, that infamous cesspool of obscenity and falsehood, has a moderation policy. Yet many people seem to imagine that publishers and platforms have a duty to promote all speech that is permitted by the First Amendment, and that any policy more restrictive than this constitutes censorship or cancellation. But this gets things exactly backwards. Editorial decisions express the First Amendment rights of the people who make them. I mean, my decision not to have RFK Jr. on my podcast because I consider him to be a liar and a loon was as much an expression of my freedom of speech as my disparaging him here is now. When Twitter kicked Alex Jones off the platform because of all the harm he was causing, monetizing a cult of lunatics that were sadistically terrorizing the mothers and fathers of children who had been murdered at Sandy Hook, that was an editorial decision. The people who made it were free to choose to no longer be associated with that evil. And when Elon Musk brought Jones back on the platform with great fanfare, along with countless other maniacs, so that he could pretend to be a free speech absolutist, all the while suspending the accounts of normal journalists he just didn't happen to like, and of course, complying with the demands of authoritarian regimes the world over to suppress the speech of political dissidents, that was an editorial decision, too.

The 2024 presidential election was widely dubbed the "podcast election" because of how decisive Trump's appearances on some of the most popular shows proved to be. And there's a consensus among leading podcasters now that a new method of investigative journalism has been discovered, wherein a host who has done very little homework, or in fact no homework at all, and is blissfully uncontaminated by any prior knowledge of a topic, no matter how socially important or combustible that topic might be, brings a truly terrible person into the studio and just hangs out with them and establishes some good vibes. This is something that no member of the mainstream media had ever had the foresight or courage to attempt. You see, it's simply impossible for a person to hide or lie or obfuscate or confabulate or otherwise fail to expose his true self once he's been lured into the smoke-filled second hour of Joe Rogan's podcast. I've actually lost count of the number of podcasters who have laid claim to this shiny discovery and

announced to their audiences that so-called "long-form conversation," otherwise known as conversation, has magical properties.

I mean, consider one Daryl Cooper. You might recall that Cooper is the amateur historian who became infamous after he appeared on Tucker Carlson's podcast, where he claimed among other things that Winston Churchill was the principal villain of World War II, having allowed himself to be manipulated by Jewish financiers, of course. Oh, and the Nazis never intended to exterminate the Jews. That was all just a big misunderstanding. They were just conquering parts of Europe as one does, and they hadn't planned on capturing so many prisoners of war, and found that when it came time to serve lunch, they just didn't have the capacity to feed them all. So in the end, they decided, out of compassion more than anything else really, that it would be more humane to kill them all with gas than to let them starve. And quote, "millions of people ended up dead," which was how Cooper recently summarized this inadvertent Holocaust. Well, these cheerful ruminations produced a certain amount of controversy. And yet the podcast world just couldn't get enough of this sweet, sweet contrarianism. So Joe Rogan invited Cooper on to his podcast to chop it up for four hours. And having done, it's safe to say, no homework, he managed not to ask him a single skeptical question.

Now, why does this matter? Well, on those two podcasts alone, Daryl Cooper, the fake historian, reached a larger audience than perhaps any real historian ever has. To convey how morally obscene this is, I'd like to remind you of what we know happened in Europe in the early 1940s. The details are strangely easy to forget. We seem desperate to forget them. And it really matters that millions of our neighbors, and especially the young, are beginning to wonder whether these things happened at all. It's important to realize that the Holocaust was unique across several dimensions of horror. It was unique in scale. There have been situations where more people died from famine or other collateral effects of deprivation and war, but there has been no greater deliberate murder of people. It was unique both with respect to its systematic planning by what was then the most advanced industrial society on earth, Germany, as well as for the widespread participation of some of the most cultured people alive at the time. I mean, consider the strangeness of what happened. Germany was in the middle of an existential war that it had started and was losing. This was a society that couldn't afford to waste anything, right, not even the clothing and hair of the millions of men, women, and children that it was murdering. And yet it was wasting vast resources and putting its own survival as a nation in jeopardy in order to commit those murders at an industrial scale. I mean, one could have pointed out to Cooper that you don't develop a process of using people's hair in textile manufacturing and industrial insulation and upholstery, and find other uses for the gold in their teeth, if you had no plan to kill them in the first place. Millions of people didn't just end up dead. This was not ordinary violence. All across Europe, millions of people were methodically annihilated, not merely by the hatred of committed racists, but by the apathy of bureaucrats and collaborators and the two innocent bystanders.

However, the Holocaust is also unique for the spontaneity with which local populations began murdering their neighbors simply because they were told they were free to do it. This happened in places like Ukraine and Romania and Estonia and Lithuania and Latvia and Poland. And in many of these places, the extermination of Jews was almost complete. I mean, there were thousands, literally thousands of spontaneous massacres of Jews in little towns throughout Eastern Europe, many conducted by men armed with nothing more than wooden clubs and iron bars. In other cases, Jews by the hundreds, men, women, and children whose names would have been known to most participants—these were little towns and villages—were simply herded into a barn or other building which was then set on fire. There are even thousands of cases of Jews who survived their starvation and torture in places like Auschwitz and, against all

odds, returned home after the end of the war, only to then be rounded up and murdered by their neighbors. I mean, there have been other genocides, but there is nothing else in human history that is quite like the Holocaust. And I think it might always defy our powers of understanding. But we must understand that it happened. And yet doubt about that is quickly spreading. Remember this when your favorite podcaster is just nodding along while his buddy is just asking questions in front of an audience of 50 million people.

Okay, so I've brought you all to a very low place. Now it's time to climb back out, gradually. How have we achieved this level of hyper-partisanship and moral confusion? Well, it's no secret that social media has had something to do with it. It's important to recognize how fast our culture is changing. And that we might just be at the beginning of this process of fragmentation. With the advent of AI, it's quite possible that we will see more change in the next 10 years than we saw in the last 50. We've had social media for about 20 years, but in its current form it's about 15 years old. Facebook introduced the like button in 2009. That was the same year that Twitter gave users the ability to retweet other posts. The social and political significance of these two innovations has been immense. I think 2009 was also the year that I started using Twitter and effectively began punching myself in the face for the next decade.

The algorithms that went to work on our resulting behavior and learned that the content most likely to be shared was that which provoked outrage. However, it's not merely the emotion of outrage that leads to virality. It is specifically his animosity towards one's political opponents. Now, why is this bad? Well, I'm not telling you something you don't already know, but maximizing for tribalism and contempt gets you more tribalism and contempt. The internet also helps extremists find one another and allows their beliefs to fester in subcultures to grow. Online, you can stay as crazy as you want for as long as you want. You can find millions of people to help you do it. And now with AI, you can find imaginary people to help you do it. And of course, there's this ancient problem that lies spread faster than the truth. This fact was famously captured by Mark Twain in his immortal line, "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes." Unfortunately, it appears that Twain never said or wrote those words. The aphorism that best captures how lies spread and become indelible is itself a lie that has spread and become indelible.

While we've been actualizing our worst selves online for nearly two decades, our commitment to democracy has also been eroding, both in rich countries and in poor ones. For the first time in 20 years, the world has fewer democracies than autocracies. Liberal democracy is now the least common form of government. 72% of people live under autocracies now. That's the highest proportion since 1978. In fact, the foundations for healthy democracies have been deteriorating globally. Freedom of expression, the integrity of elections, restraints upon political violence. It's hard to believe that the correlation between these unhappy developments and the rise of social media is just an accident. In my view, platforms like X and Facebook have placed billions of us in a grotesque simulacrum of a real-time conversation. And they've become the most powerful engines of tribalism and delusion humanity has ever produced. And we're not merely being misinformed, we are living in alternate realities. Any discussion of topics like immigration and border security, or healthcare and vaccines, or gender identity and parental rights, or race and policing, or election integrity and foreign influence, or climate change and energy policy, or free speech and censorship, will produce not merely disagreement about priorities and trade-offs, but utter confusion about facts. We no longer agree about what's happening in the world, much less on what to do about it. We're waging and losing an information war with ourselves. And the line between asking good questions and trafficking in dangerous fictions has become very difficult to discern. But if we don't find it again, our capacity for mutual understanding and rational cooperation will further erode.

What we're witnessing now in real time is our increasing failure to coordinate, right, to behave sanely together in the face of complex challenges, even when we all desire the same outcome. A coordination problem isn't merely a clash of interests. Everyone may want the same thing, and that thing may be very easy to accomplish, and yet we still might fail. Everyone wants to avoid a car crash, for instance. But unless we can agree about which side of the road to drive on, every trip in a car will be one long emergency. Coordination is made possible by laws and social norms and a background of trust in what other people will think and do. It requires that we take many, many things for granted. Above all, we need to care about what is real, and we need to be able to trust that others care about it too. We need a reality bias. We need to return to the principles of reason and skepticism and ethical seriousness and recognize how easily they can be abandoned. It might not be too much to say that we need a second enlightenment, one that embraces scientific reasoning and safeguards democratic institutions and fosters a culture of intellectual honesty in a global context, recognizing that no traditions or ideas can be maintained in isolation from all others.

The enlightenment wasn't perfect, but it gave us almost everything that works. It gave us the very notion that reason, and in particular freedom of thought, the freedom to criticize cherished ideas, is the path to human progress. The enlightenment made it possible to understand that the church and the crown could both be wrong. And that it was the right of every person to notice this without having his head cut off. The enlightenment laid the foundation for liberal democracy and human rights and science and the modern world as we know it. But of course, many people worry that we took this freedom of thought thing too far. They think that a worldview based on reason and science and individual rights can become decadent or even its own form of tyranny, flattening culture and divorcing people from tradition and promoting a mechanistic view of the world that can neglect the emotional and aesthetic and spiritual roots of a good life. And there's something to that. The freedom to question everything is producing a fair amount of chaos now. On the right, it has given us authoritarian populism and conspiracy thinking and a blizzard of lies. On the left, it has given us moral relativism and a progressive mob that seems incapable of even detecting, much less producing progress. A world in which everyone is entitled to their own opinion may in fact be a world full of entitled fools. But there is a remedy for this. And it doesn't entail stifling our intelligence or going backwards in time to join an iron-age cult.

Contrary to the opinions of many prominent people, we don't all have to double down on Christianity to resist Islamic theocracy on the one hand or a secular wasteland of tone policing and porn addiction on the other. There's no going backwards. I'm not saying there are no traditions that are worth preserving. Clearly there are. In fact, we'd be good to recapture the traditional dialectic between conservatism and liberalism at this point because we now live in a world where the right is no longer conservative and the left is no longer liberal. Both are now authoritarian in their own ways. I mean, Trump's populism isn't conservative at all because it undermines institutions and demands loyalty to him over the rule of law. And social justice progressivism isn't liberal because it sacrifices free speech and individual rights in favor of identity politics and ideological conformity. Both of these movements are enemies of liberal democracy.

However, we shouldn't be too sentimental about the past. Behind us is mostly provincialism and ignorance and error. We need to accomplish a forward escape. We need more clarity of thought, more honesty, more creativity, more ethical integrity, more impatience with dogmatism and tribalism. And we must demand this impatience of others. In a world drowning in information but starved for wisdom, we have to rediscover the value of careful thought. And we must continue to build institutions that embody that thought and deserve our trust. And of course, we must hold them accountable when they betray that trust. None of this requires perfect objectivity, much

less sainthood. It simply requires a commitment to truth that is deeper than our loyalty to any tribe or ideology. Tribal identity and dogmatism are guaranteed to lead us astray because they make it almost impossible to correct errors or even notice them. And we need to re-anchor our shared reality to something sturdier than podcasts and newsletters, to say nothing of tweets and YouTube clips. If we don't find a way to do this, if we don't recover the enlightenment project and upgrade it for the 21st century, then our most pressing problems will remain insoluble. We have to recognize that a shared sense of reality is a public good, and it's one that we are actively destroying with increasingly powerful tools.

But of course, none of us can wait to be happy until such a time as everyone else gets their shit together. If you're waiting for the front page of The New York Times to announce that everything is fine and there's nothing to worry about, you'll be waiting a very long time. And this is the seeming paradox at the center of our lives because in almost any context, it is actually possible to be happy. This may sound trite, but it's actually the most important thing I have to say. In this and every other moment, your mind is all you have. Its openness or lack of openness, its agitation or its calm, its contraction into one or another state of irritation or agony, or its freedom from all that. Everything you experience, everything you see and hear and feel and think arises in consciousness. Even your relationships, your values, your goals, they all depend on how you pay attention to your experience and what you notice or fail to notice. While there are many problems in our lives and out in the world, experience as it is in the present moment remains the only reality that can actually be lived. Everything else is a thought about the past or the future. Each of us is alone with our thoughts, along with everyone else, friends and strangers, who are alone with their thoughts. Each of us is struggling and planning and hoping to have good enough reasons to connect with the reality of our lives and to stay there. But most of us can't manage this for more than a few moments at a time. There's always this next thought about what was or what might be. That thing you wish you hadn't said. That missed opportunity that you resolve to never miss again, and then miss again, giving you more to think about. Our plans for the future seem to rob the present of its significance. And yet the future never arrives. We cannot win this game by postponing our happiness until such a time as we have good enough reasons to be happy.

We all know that old age, disease, and death are inevitable. Apart from a few billionaires about 10 miles from here who know otherwise. But we're continually surprised to encounter them in our lives. The fact that we're surprised is actually diagnostic of a fairly peculiar state of mind. It reveals what we think, whatever we think we think. On some level, we don't expect bad things to happen, even though we know they will. We feel like we have all the time in the world to become the people we want to be. We should probably just start being those people now. Of course, on occasion, events oblige us to be happy and grateful and full of love, for a while at least. But then these experiences subside and become memories. And we're left with our thoughts again. The truth about life that most people never understand until it's too late, and those of us who do understand it, have to rediscover it 10,000 times before it sinks in, is that we cannot become happy. We can only be happy. Because this is it. This is not a rehearsal for anything. This is the show. Whatever reason you have for not being as happy as you can be right now is a ransom note that the LLM in your head just wrote. It's not real.

Despite all the things we need to fix out in the world, our first job is to become sane. Because our ethics, our relationships, our politics, everything is downstream of what our minds are doing moment to moment. So if you want to live a good life and add something other than noise to the situation, begin by paying closer attention. Learn to rest in the simplicity of just being aware of what it's like to be you in the present moment. Begin to untie this knot of self-concern. This is meditation, by another name. And in my experience, it's the doorway to nearly everything that

matters, or rather it's the way of cutting through nearly everything that doesn't matter.
Now, all I've been talking about on some level is freedom. Political freedom, psychological freedom. And there's a paradox here that seems to confound many people. At this point in history, we must acknowledge the primacy and even sacredness of each individual. Politically, this is a kind of master algorithm. This is how we escape the trap of tribalism once and for all. But we must simultaneously recognize the profanity of the ego. Almost nobody manages to do both of these things. We want societies of free individuals who can do more or less whatever they want. And yet it is also true that it's possible to want the wrong things. Anyone who is narrowly selfish, who thinks he has no stake in the common good, the tech bros who think they can just fly off to New Zealand when their malignant business models and their tax evasion make life insufferable here, these people are assholes. Sorry for the few of you that might actually be in this room. I mean, the only way to be wisely selfish is to want other people to thrive too. The more you win, the more you should recognize that you don't want to be surrounded by desperate, resentful, and increasingly angry people who are losing. Of course, this reckoning over wealth inequality has been a long time in coming, and I'm reasonably sure that the advances in AI will force us to confront it. And like everything else, it will not be boring. But no one is coming to save us. Only we can improve our culture. And we can do this by caring about different things or caring about things differently. It's like there's this digital tide that is sweeping everything in the wrong direction. And the only way to reverse it is to swim against it. I mean, if we really cared about honesty, for instance, lying would be absolutely fatal to a person's political ambitions. This change could happen overnight, or it could take 100 years. It's up to us.
We need to begin caring about things that matter and sustain our attention on them for long enough to allow them to matter. Each of us must take responsibility for this all at the same time. If we can do this, our future selves, to say nothing of future generations, will have many reasons to thank us. And perhaps we'll then find ourselves in a culture that is so creative and sensible and good that we can barely imagine it today. And yet we all know deep down that it's possible. Thank you very much. I'm sure we'll have more to talk about.